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Workplace cooperation among women and men

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A well-worn tenet of the common wisdom about women is that they tend to avoid competitive work environments in favor of more cooperative situations. Much academic research supports this tenet and even adds the supposed finding that women tend to perform worse than men in competitive environments. The explanation in the literature is that women find competition distasteful and have less confidence in their own abilities than men have in theirs. In “[Are women more attracted to cooperation than men?](#)” authors Peter J. Kuhn and Marie Claire Villeval (National Bureau of Economic Research, working paper no. 19277, August 2013) dispute this blanket assertion about women and perform an experiment which suggests that, at least under certain conditions, women and men are equally disposed to choose a cooperative work arrangement over a more competitive one.

The experiment is divided into six parts and is designed to replicate a workplace environment, rather than the usual tournament situation that dominates the literature on the subject, a situation that the authors believe women do in fact shy away from. The task is the same in all parts of the experiment: to decode numbers into letters according to a code that changes repeatedly. Payment is calculated for each part, but the subjects will actually be paid only for one of the parts, and it is not known which part that is until the end of the last part. Forming or joining a team or choosing team-based pay acts as a proxy for cooperation.

All six parts are broken into several sessions each and are performed twice: once with team and individual performance equally productive and a second time with team production having a 10-percent productivity advantage over individual production. The purpose of the second run is to study the extent of participants’ preferences for teams in a setting where technological factors favor team production.

The experiment produced three major findings, with interesting explanations and ramifications. First, when participants can choose between individual- and team-based pay, and when team production has no extra efficiency, women choose team-based pay more frequently than men do. The likely explanation is that men are more pessimistic than women about the abilities of those they are considering as teammates. Second, when team production is given even a small efficiency advantage over individual production, women and men join teams with the same frequency. In other words, under the “right” conditions, women and men are equally cooperative, with men being more responsive to efficiency gains than women are. Finally, when the opportunity for social interaction is available, the effect on the frequency with which team pay is chosen is large, especially among women. This effect suggests that social preferences—particularly in women—play a large role in the choice of team compensation and hence, by proxy, cooperation. In this regard, it may also be that women’s aversion to inequity is stronger than that of men, and such stronger aversion affects their choices when it comes to the rules for team formation.